

## BIBLICAL VOICES OF PROTEST

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Hermann Gunkel and, more recently, Claus Westermann have recognized in Old Testament literature, especially in the Psalms, a certain genre or category of literature described as “laments.” Addressed to Jahweh, the laments are expressions of grief or cries of concern, personal or national. Within this broad category, not only in the Psalms but especially in the prophets, is a smaller group recognizable as complaints. These include complaints about the prosperity of the wicked, particularly noticeable in Psalms 49 and 73, Jeremiah 12:1–3, and in the Book of Job. This study seeks to pursue the motif of the complaint further and to isolate more precisely a genre which can be properly called expressions of protest. Expressed with varying degrees of urgency the protests are specifically directed to Jahweh.

In prophetic literature a genre has been isolated which is characterized as the judgments of Jahweh against his people. In many cases a formal indictment is drawn up with the Lord appealing to the conscience of mankind and presenting an individual or the nation as the defender.<sup>1</sup>

Examples include Nathan’s parable against David, in which the king is accused of murder and the theft of his neighbor’s wife (II Sam. 12). Another instance in the accusation against the theft of Naboth’s vineyard and the murder of its owner (I K. 19). More typical is Jahweh bringing an indictment against his unfaithful people, as in Isaiah 1:1–10 and Micah 6:2–8. In such formal court scenes the Lord is the accuser, Israel is the defendant, and the universe, the hills or neighboring nations serve as the jury.

In the passages to which attention is now called, the situation is reversed. The Biblical writer is the accuser and Jahweh the defendant.

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<sup>1</sup>C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, pp. 142ff.

Instead of the Lord accusing his people of wrongdoing and unfaithfulness, the writer accuses Jahweh of three types of malpractice — of inconsistency, of negligence and even of wrongdoing. In one instance Moses is said to have referred to the Egyptians as a jury which would adjudge Israel's God to be either inconsistent, malicious, or incapable of accomplishing what he set out to do (Ex. 32:12).

### **God Said To Be Inconsistent**

We may first consider accusations of inconsistency on the part of God. It is recognized that many times Jahweh *seems* to have acted inconsistently as when he repented after having created man and decided to destroy mankind in the deluge; or when he determined to destroy the ungrateful Israelites in the Sinai desert after he had delivered them from Egypt; or when he sent Israel into captivity after a period of domicile in the promised land. In each of these cases, this change of attitude was occasioned by acts of man rather than an alteration in Jahweh's "life style." Indeed it was an inner consistency which demanded these punishments for breach of contract on the part of man.

The problem lies in situations in which the Lord's inconsistency is apparently inexplicable and cannot be defended on rational grounds. Here God is accused of being inconsistent with his own principles. Job, for example, demands "Does it seem good to thee to oppress, to despise the work of thy hands" (Job 10:3). He continues, "Thy hands fashioned and made me; and now thou dost turn about and destroy me." He pursues the question in these words, "Remember that thou hast made me of clay, and wilt thou turn me to dust again?" The point is that it is inconsistent for the Creator to destroy the work of his own creation for no apparent reason. Certain passages note the same inconsistency in his dealings with his nation of Israel. The Psalmist reminds the Lord, ". . . In days of old . . . thou hast saved us. . . . Yet thou hast cast us off and abased us. . . ." (Ps. 44:1-9). The Lord is accused of casting off his congregation after he had redeemed them and of being angry at his own "sheep of his pasture" for no discernable reason (Ps. 74:1,2). The tragedy itself is bad enough; that it seems to discredit God makes it unbearable. In another Psalm, "Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt . . . turn again, . . . see; have regard for this vine" (Ps. 80:8,14). While most references to Israel's punishment are accompanied by the awareness that it is justly deserved, here no such explanation is provided. The writer can find no justification for this apparent inconsistency.

Even more poignant than these examples is the statement of Habakkuk giving voice to the problem of theodicy at the beginning of the sixth century when the Chaldean menace appeared on the horizon. Habakkuk is sure that God is pure and righteous and hence cannot explain why God apparently looks upon wrong and is silent when the wicked “swallows up a man more righteous than he” (Hab. 1:13). He demands “how long” shall this intolerable situation be allowed to continue? For God to be negligent of unchecked evil is held to be inconsistent with his goodness and his greatness. It would be no problem if God were great and not good or, on the other hand, if he were good but not great. If, however, he is believed to be both great and good, his failure to challenge the encroachment of evil remains inexplicable. The prophet, however, is urged to wait and to trust (Hab. 2:1–4).

### **God Is A “No Show”**

Another phase of the protest has to do with the recognition that while normally God can be expected to be “a very present help in time of trouble” (Ps. 46:1), there are other instances in which the reverse is true, where God is *not* a very present help in time of need. In many of these passages, the complaint is that Jahweh hides his face and evades the issue (Job. 13:24; Ps. 10:1 – “Why do you hide in times of trouble?” – 11; Ps. 13:1; Ps. 34:24; Ps. 88:14). Other complaints include that of not appearing when most needed (Ps. 22:1,2). “Why has thou forsaken me; why so far from helping me. . . I cry day by day but thou dost not answer me.” Jahweh is accused of forgetting (Ps. 13:1), of ignoring the cries of the poor for help. In the words of Job 24:22: “The poor cry for help yet God pays no attention to their prayer.” The Lord is accused of sleeping when he should be available and responsive (Ps. 44:23). In other words, God is seen as being a “no show” when his help is most urgently needed.

One of the most powerful protests is attributed to Moses. After six attempts to avoid becoming involved in the matter, Moses goes to Pharaoh, in obedience to Jahweh’s command, and makes his request, only to find that his request is denied. The people’s lot becomes more irksome as a result, and things are then worse instead of better, with Moses rejected both by Pharaoh and by his own people. Moses had fulfilled his part of the deal, but complains to God, “Thou hast not delivered thy people” (Ex. 5:23). Thus Moses’ contention is more than an inquiry, more than an expression of frustration and perplexity. It is an

outraged protest and accusation of non-compliance on the part of Jahweh. However, Moses is not rebuked, but the Lord patiently explains his continuing strategy.

### Wrongdoing

For the Lord to be inconsistent in his dealings or negligent in his duties is serious enough, but even more serious are accusations of actual *wrongdoing*. Here, protest reaches its climax. In the same context of the Lord's failure to do as he agreed in the confrontation with Pharaoh, Moses accuses God of doing evil and asks, "Why hast thou done evil?" (Ex. 5:23). The protest changes from an accusation of inactivity to one of actually doing evil. Similarly Jeremiah accuses the Lord of *deceiving* him when he finds himself placed in stocks by Pashur (Jer. 20:7). Job accuses God of having *turned cruel* to him (Job. 30:20). A serious accusation of evil doing is voiced in Psalm 80:7, "Thou dost make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh. . . ." It is worth noting that to be laughed at by one's enemies and neighbors was a source of profound embarrassment, as it is voiced in many different ways.

Another voice demands, "Why dost *thou cast us off* forever?" The poignancy of such an inquiry lies in the Psalmist's apparent failure to see any explanation or reason for this attitude on the part of Jahweh. In effect, he is accusing Jahweh of wrongdoing, of a gross injustice to the nation. Along the same line is the demand, "Why then hast thou broken the walls of Jerusalem" (Ps. 80:12). No prophet is on hand to explain that the destruction of the city is the consequence of national sin, so the Psalmist is left to brood upon the problem with his question unanswered. Another Psalmist is so bold as to say, "Thou hast renounced the covenant" (Ps. 89:39). We are accustomed to find Jahweh accusing the people of breaking the covenant, but here it is Jahweh who is accused of breaking the covenant he himself has devised and that without justification.

But the protest is the most sustained and embittered in Psalm 44: 11–24. The writer, a devout person, speaks in grateful memory of Israel's proud past in which it was the recipient of great favors from Jahweh. He reminds the Lord of the deeds he performed in the days of old when he drove out the nations to make room for Israel. Further, the writer recalls the foes conquered by the Lord's initiative. However, the past, fragrant with the memories of divine providence, is no longer.

“Yet now,” the Psalmist continues, “thou hast cast us off and abased us.” There follows a series of accusations in which God’s behavior and attitude are contrasted sharply with his past beneficences. “Thou has scattered us among the nations. Thou hast sold thy people for a trifle demanding no high price for them” (Ps. 44:11,12). This demeaning of the Israelites has resulted in their becoming a laughing stock among the nations. Israel’s disgrace, deep and unmitigated, would be bearable if it could be viewed as a punishment that was deserved, but no explanation is in evidence. “All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten thee, nor have been false to thy covenant. Our heart is not turned back, nor have our steps departed from thy way” (Ps. 44:17,18).

The Psalmist continues his protestation by claiming that God knows of their innocence. “If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread forth our hands to a strange god, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart” (Ps. 44:20,21). Against this injustice on the part of Jahweh, the Psalmist has no recourse other than appealing to Jahweh not only to change, to arise from sleep, to cease hiding his face, to stop forgetting their affliction, but to rise up and come to their assistance (Ps. 44:23–26).

Normally these protests are formed of three components. After a prologue reviewing Jahweh’s gracious dealings in the past, there is a question prefaced by the interrogative pronoun “Why” (over 20 times) or “How long” (over 10 times). Then comes the accusation, usually one of inconsistency, or of neglect, or even of wrongdoing. This sometimes is followed by a protestation of innocence on the part of the protestor. The problem may be alleviated by the admonition to wait a while longer as with Habakkuk, or, as in the case of Job, a theophany appears, which leaves the questioner speechless. More often the problem is left unresolved.

### Summary

In Scripture the admonition, “Wait on the Lord,” is frequently voiced. As these cases indicate, however, patience is sometimes exhausted and the Lord’s delay leads to protests of such intensity that they deserve separate categorization. When complaints become so acute as to constitute protests, they merit recognition as such. When court scenes are reversed in which Israel is accusing Jahweh of inconsistency, negligence or even wrongdoing, such passages deserve isolation as a genre characterized as protests against Jahweh.

The question arises as to how could a believer in Jahweh entertain such sentiments and still be considered loyal? It is noteworthy that in spite of the poignancy of their protest and the justice with which they urged it, in no case is there an abandonment of faith. None of the protesters ended as skeptics. It could be said that it was their faith that emboldened them to make these demands, to voice these protests. Had there been less faith, they might have remained inarticulate, brooding (as Koheleth), despairing, or in angry repudiation of Jahweh and their past. Instead their faith was strongest when they asked and expected an explanation from Jahweh.